

Speaker's Task Force on Children and the Recession Public Hearing  
1<sup>st</sup> Congressional District  
December 5, 2009

Hello, My name is Suzette Strickland and I am the SNAP Policy Manager for End Hunger CT!, At EHC! we conduct SNAP/Food Stamp outreach to help more people access the program. Since January of this year we have assisted over 628 families in accessing the SNAP program. Our on-line SNAP benefit calculator receives 80-150 hits a day and we receive approximately 70-80 calls on our 1-800 SNAP-LINE per month. In our office alone, the number of walk-ins has also increased. In October 94 individuals came into our Hartford Office. These numbers will continue to climb with the major difficulties families are having accessing the SNAP program at their local DSS offices.

In a recent report by the USDA Connecticut had one of the largest increases in food insecurity in the nation. 11 percent people living in households struggled with hunger during the 2006-2008 period. This is a 2.8 percent increase from the previous 2003-2005 study that indicated 8.2 percent of the population was food insecure.

4.1 percent of those living in Connecticut households live in very low food insecure households. People that fall into this USDA category had more severe problems experiencing hunger and cutting back or skipping meals on a more frequent basis for both adults and children. This was an increase from 2.6 percent from the 2003-2005 study. Connecticut is 26<sup>th</sup> in the nation for food insecurity in the country and 35<sup>th</sup> for families struggling with low food insecurity.

We often see families accessing the SNAP program who are first time recipients and never have applied for any federal programs in the past. A large number of families from some of Connecticut's more affluent towns such as Avon and West Hartford, are applying for SNAP benefits, and qualifying.

For example, I assisted a Woman from West Hartford this week. Her husband is a full-time medical student and she just gave birth to their first child. She was very discourage after a failed attempt to apply at the local DSS office due to the long lines, she found herself at my office with baby in hand and in tears. She said "I was at the end of my rope, I waited in line for over two hours at the DSS office just to be told that I had to come back tomorrow, I didn't know what else to do". With student loans being their only source of income, I was happy to tell her that she was eligible for the SNAP program.

Connecticut has seen a 2.4% increase in SNAP participation. That's 286,957 active recipients that are now receiving SNAP benefits statewide. SNAP participation is rising rapidly.

Caseloads at the local DSS offices are estimated at 2000 cases per eligibility worker - a manageable case load is around 500. Legally DSS is required to process emergency cases within 7 calendar days. That is



not happening. More than 75% of the clients that we assist from the Hartford, New Britain and Manchester regions are waiting well over 30 days for expedited cases to be processed. Expedited cases are those who have \$150.00 or less in income, or their monthly shelter expenses exceed their monthly income. In some cases clients have waited over 2-3 months for benefits to be granted. With the recent changes in staffing at DSS due early retirement, eligibility workers are not able to keep up with the increase in participation, meaning applications are taking longer to process. Voice mail boxes remain full, making it virtually impossible to reach anyone at regional offices in Connecticut.

Trying to apply at the DSS office is becoming increasingly difficult as well. Lines of people form out the door and down the street before 7:30 a.m. for the 8:30 opening of the DSS office. The USDA reports that one in three people are potentially eligible for the SNAP program, and do not receive benefits. We need to remember that the SNAP benefit frees up money in the family that can go to other basic needs – as well as bringing in much needed cash to a neighborhood.

A recent study conducted by the researchers at Washington University shows that 49 percent of American children live in a household receiving SNAP benefits. Researchers say by the age of one, just over 12 percent of children have lived in households receiving food stamps, with the number climbing to 49.2 percent by the age of 20. More than one and eight Americans receiving SNAP benefits, and those numbers are increasing by approximately 20,000 people per day.

With this number rising daily, it is imperative that we increase the staffing at the DSS office. Caseloads are unmanageable, mistakes are happening, and our children are suffering because of it.